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ABSTRACT

Questions designed to assess children's reactions to the ending of friendships were asked in structured interviews involving 64 children (30 third graders and 34 sixth graders). Subjects, divided almost equally by sex, were mostly white and primarily middle-class. Questions were specifically designed to elicit information regarding (1) why and how friendship termination occurs; (2) the perceived frequency of termination in the child's peer group; and (3) the child's personal experiences with termination, including details on when the event occurred and on the child's affective and behavioral reactions. Results indicated that the experience of friendship termination is perceived as a meaningful event in a child's life. Only a few grade differences emerged in the reactions to termination, and sex differences were inconsistent across questions. Girls were more reluctant than boys to initiate breakups, and girls in general also appeared to be somewhat less casual than boys about breakups. Though they did not differ from boys in their affective reactions to termination, girls were more likely to discuss the event with others, and they were also more likely to tell their partner explicitly that they had decided to terminate the relationship. A sample interview and a coding guide are appended. (RH)

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Children's Reactions to the Termination of Friendship

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Children's Reactions to the Termination of Friendship

Introduction

There is an increasing recognition that the various affective, cognitive and behavioral experiences that occur within the bond of friendship may be as significant in a child's development as familial attachments (Asher and Gottman, 1981; Damon, 1977; Rubin and Ross, 1982; Youniss, 1980). Friendship is one important way in which children learn the rules and norms by which society functions. Research has demonstrated that having friends promotes social skill development (Corsaro, 1981) and facilitates complex forms of play (Gottman and Parkhurst, 1980). Friends also help children learn to manage their aggressive inclinations and sexual feelings (Fine, 1981; Hartup, 1978). Several theorists of children's peer relations suggest that equity and justice motives, the norm of reciprocity, and the need for affiliation originate in the interactions of children within the bonds of friendship (Piaget, 1932; Sullivan, 1953). Thus, the study of children's friendship is an excellent way to learn more about both social development and human relationships in general.

The current body of research on children's friendship generally focuses on two basic issues: (1) the nature of children's conceptions of friendship, and (2) those factors which affect interpersonal attraction and subsequent friendship formation (see Furman [1982] for a review). Many other aspects of friendship remain unexplored at this time. For example, friendship in childhood can be an emotionally intense relationship, and data indicate that most children experience the deterioration and ending of friendship several times before adolescence (Rubin, 1980). It has also been suggested that the manner in which children deal with the loss of friends may importantly affect their feelings of loneliness in adulthood (Shaver and Rubinstein, 1981).

However, little research has been done on this important aspect of children's friendships. Some investigators have detailed children's reasons for ending friendships (e.g., Austin & Thompson, 1948; Youniss, 1980), but little information exists regarding other facets of the experience, and many questions about the ending of a friendship remain unanswered. For example, what are children's various affective, behavioral and cognitive reactions to this event? What type of coping mechanisms do they use to deal with the loss of a friend? Are any aspects of the termination process affected by age or sex? Since the termination of friendship is a meaningful and somewhat common experience in childhood, these questions must be empirically addressed.

It was decided that the best way to answer some of the above questions was to use a structured interview.. Questions designed to assess children's reactions to the ending of friendship were derived from a model of the termination process proposed by the investigator. The interview technique for studying termination was used because it has several advantages. First, interview data yield a picture of the termination process as it is described by the children themselves. The subjective element in human relationships is probably the most compelling part of reality for the participants (Levinger, 1980). Also, children's interpretations of the event and the feelings associated with it are useful to understanding the process of termination. Finally, the use of other methods to investigate termination is impractical. The use of a quasi-experimental technique to study children immediately before and after termination is an excellent research strategy but is extremely difficult to implement. Having children write essays about friendship ending would produce information that is confounded by differences in writing ability. Thus, for this preliminary look at the termination process, the structured interview appeared to be the most appropriate research strategy.

The present study was also designed to determine if age differences exist in children's reactions to termination. Research from the cognitive-developmental perspective has shown that children's conceptions of friendship change dramatically with age (Damon, 1977; Selman, 1980; Youniss, 1980). Younger children (6-9) generally define friends as those who share concrete resources, play with each other, or help each other. However, older children (10-13) are more likely to describe friends as articulated individuals with special needs for intimacy, loyalty, and mutual support. It is not known whether these different conceptions of friendship affect children's reactions to termination. Thus, it was decided to compare the reactions of younger and older children.

Consistent sex differences have not been demonstrated in children's conceptions of friendship. However, boys tend to make friends more easily than girls, and they also have a wider network of friends than girls (Eder and Hallinan, 1978). Since these factors may influence children's reactions to the loss of a friend, it was decided to test for sex differences as well.

Method

Subjects

The sample consisted of 64 children: 30 younger children (third-graders, 16 males and 14 females) and 34 older children (sixth-graders, 15 males and 19 females). Fifty-six subjects were white, and 8 subjects were black.

The children were students in a public school system in a small Southern town. The school was integrated and the students were primarily middle-class. Permission to participate in the study was granted by the children's parents prior to the interview. The sample was chosen from third and sixth grade classrooms where the children were at least of average I.Q., performing

academically at their grade level, and not suffering from physical handicaps, emotional handicaps, or learning disabilities. The use of this sample was expected to reduce any problems due to inadequate comprehension of the stimulus materials or inability to verbalize friendship experiences.

The Interview

An early version of the interview was developed and pilot tested on 18 children. Revisions were made, and a final version was prepared (see Appendix A). The interview contained both open- and closed-ended questions. Questions were designed to elicit information regarding: why and how termination occurs, the perceived frequency of termination in the child's peer group and the child's personal experiences with termination, including when it happened and the affective and behavioral reactions. One section of the interview (Section C) consisted of a hypothetical story about two best friends whose friendship ended due to a conflict. One member of the friendship pair initiated the ending. Questions based on this story were designed to elicit information about affective responses. All interview questions were worded using the term "best friend" in order to control for the intensity of the relationship being investigated.

Procedure

Interviews were conducted at the child's school. After the interviewer was introduced to the child by his/her teacher, the child was taken to a quiet room. The child was then informed about the general nature of the interview and told that he/she could end the interview at any time and for any reason. Permission was sought from the child to use a tape-recorder to record all responses. All children agreed to this procedure. The child was then

instructed on the use of a seven-point response scale. The hypothetical story was accompanied by a set of cartoon illustrations. During this phase of the interview, the investigator kept the cartoon illustrations in full view of the child to insure understanding. Cartoon characters matched each individual child in race, sex, and age. Also, each child was given the opportunity to have the story repeated, if necessary. The interview took approximately 20 minutes to complete. On completion of the interview, each child was thanked for his/her participation and asked not to discuss the experience with others.

The Coding Process

Individual responses to each open-ended question were listed and carefully reviewed by the investigator in order to develop a coding scheme. The final version of the coding guide is presented in Appendix B. Coding was done by two independent raters, the investigator, and a research assistant who was unfamiliar with the nature of the project. A total of twelve questions were involved in this process. Interrater reliabilities were calculated using Cohen's Kappa formula. Kappa values ranged from .28 to .94. Z scores for these values ranged from 3.562 to 16.858 (all p's $< .001$). Following the completion of coding by the two raters, a discussion was held to resolve any disagreements.

Data Analysis

Grade Level X Sex Analyses of Variance were performed on all closed-ended questions: B2., C2., C4., D2., D7. Repeated-measures analyses of variance were also performed in certain cases. Finally, Pearson Product-Moment correlations were calculated on children's responses to all closed-ended questions.

The chi-square statistic was used on several open-ended questions: B3., B4., D10., and D12. It was not appropriate for use on the remaining non-scaled data (see DeLucchi, 1983). Therefore, grade and sex level "effects" on these questions were determined by merely inspecting relative frequency data. These questions include: C1., C3., C5., C6., C7., D4., D6., and D8.

Results

Before presenting the results, several things should be mentioned. First, unless otherwise stated, N = 64 for each question. Also, in computing relative frequency data, missing data were not included in the calculation of the total number of responses. In the discussion of relative frequency data in the text, percentages often do not add up to 100. This is because categories with small numbers of responses are sometimes not discussed in the text.

Termination

Grade effects. Surprisingly, there was only one significant main effect due to grade level on the closed-ended questions regarding termination. Sixth graders reported more intense affect following a personal experience with termination than third graders (Question D7., $\underline{M}$ = 5.37 vs. $\underline{M}$ = 4.26, $\underline{N}$ = 57, $\underline{p} < .05$).

Frequency data from the open-ended questions revealed several other differences between grade levels. In responding to the hypothetical story about termination, most third graders (70%) claimed that the partner felt sad when the friendship ended, but only 29.4% of the sixth graders claimed sadness as the response (Question C1., $\underline{N}$ = 64). Sixth graders were also more likely

to claim that their personal experiences with terminations were mutually desired rather than one-sided (Question D5., 50% vs. 30%, $N = 56$). The most frequent response following a personal experience with termination, as reported by sixth graders on Question D6., was feeling upset or angry (36.6%), but for third graders the most common feeling was sadness (44.4%). In addition, twice as many sixth graders as third graders reported feeling angry or upset after termination (36.6% vs. 18.55% $N = 57$). Regarding this same question, more sixth graders expressed a greater variety of reactions to termination than did third graders. Almost half (44.4%) of the third graders reported sadness after termination, as opposed to only 20% of the sixth graders. The remaining sixth grade responses fell mainly into three other categories: angry or upset (36.6%), conflicting emotions (16.6%), and glad (16.6%). After a personal experience with termination, twice as many sixth graders as third graders reported that they physically separated from their former friends (Question D8., 40% vs. 22.2%, $N = 57$).

Sex effects No significant main effects due to sex emerged on any of the closed-ended questions regarding termination. However, responses on Question B3. revealed that girls were more likely than boys to claim that they let their partner know when they wanted to end a friendship ($X2$ [1, $N = 64$] = 6.21, $p < .025$). Also, on Question D10., girls were more likely than boys to say that they talked to someone, usually their mothers, following a personal experience with termination ($X2$ [1, $n = 57$] = 2.81 $p < .10$).

Frequency data from other open-ended questions indicated the existence of sex differences in other areas. Responses to Question D5. revealed that 43.3% of the girls claimed that their partner initiated their last termination experience, but only 19% of the boys stated this. By contrast, 34% of the boys claimed that they initiated the last breakup, but only 16.6% of the girls

responded in this way (N = 56). Following a personal experience with termination (Question D3., N = 57) girls most often stated that they physically separated from their former friend (35.4%), but boys most often claimed that they ignored their former friend or just continued to go on with the usual activities (30.7%). Also, 32.2% of the girls claimed to look for another friend following termination, but only 15.3% of the boys reported this. However, a large portion of the boys said that they physically separated from their former friend following a termination experience (26.9%).

Personal experience with termination. Eighty-nine percent of the total sample reported that they had a personal experience with termination. Of these 89%, 27 were third graders (13 males, 17 females). Question D3. (N = 54) was intended to measure the last time that this subsample had an experience with friendship termination. Almost one-half (46.3%) claimed that it occurred more than one month but less than one year ago. Remaining categories were: less than a week (16.7%); more than one week but less than one month (14.8%); and, more than one year (22.2%). In discussing their affective reactions to the termination experience, 14% indicated that they felt glad or positive about the experience while 31.6% reported feeling bad and 28.1% reported being angry or upset (Question D6., N = 57). This is an interesting contrast to Questions C1. and C3. which evoke descriptions of affect attributed to the characters in the hypothetical story. On Question C1., no child attributed a positive feeling to the partner (initiator of the breakup) in the story, while only 3.1% attributed it to the other person in Question C3. On C1., 48.4% reported that the partner (initiator of the breakup) felt bad, while 12.5% said that the partner felt any or upset. On Question C3., the percentages were 40.6 and 21.9, respectively. Also, while fighting is most often cited as the reason why friendships in general break up

(43.4%, Question B1a.), children are more specific when describing their own experiences with termination. Almost 40% described a specific offensive behavior when detailing the cause of their friendship breakup, but only 20.8% merely listed fighting (cause of the conflict not described) as the reason for breakup (Question D4., N = 53).

Differences between responses. A repeated measures analysis comparing selected closed-ended responses to the termination questions revealed that there was no difference between the amount of affect attributed to the characters in the hypothetical story (Questions C2. and C4.). There was also no difference between the amount of affect attributed to the partner in the story and the amount of affect experienced by the child after a termination experience (Questions C2. and D7.). In comparing the amount of affect attributed to the person in the story and the affect experienced by the child after a termination, there was a main effect for grade across these questions, with sixth graders reporting more intense emotion (Questions C4. and D7., M = 5.40 vs. M = 4.50, N = 57, $p < .02$). Correlational analyses further revealed that the intensity of affect attributed to the two charactersin the hypothetical story was positively correlated (Questions C2. and C4., r = .23, $p < .05$).

Discussion

Present data indicate that the experience of friendship termination is perceived as a meaningful event in a child's life. Children reported definite, fairly intense affective reactions to the loss, and were able to describe clearly a variety of behavioral reactions to the event.

Some information given was retrospective (i.e., personal accounts of

termination experiences), and its "accuracy" may be questioned. However, these retrospective self-reports are useful because they provide an indication of the various aspects of termination that are more or less permanently incorporated into children's general conceptual framework about peer friendships.

In view of the cognitive developmental research demonstrating age changes in the meaning of friendship, it is quite surprising that only a few grade differences emerged in the reactions to termination. There are several possible reasons for this. Most questions sought information regarding affective or behavioral responses. It is possible that direct linkages among cognitions, affect, and behavior do not exist. Thus, cognitive representations of friendship may change several times during childhood, but behavior and affect may follow a different developmental course. To date, few studies have addressed this issue in relation to children's friendships, and it is certainly an area which needs further exploration. It is also possible that children perceive the practice of friendship and the ending of friendship to be distinctly different processes, and each evokes a separate way of thinking, feeling, and behaving. Because of this, the ways in which children become friends or practice friendship may not be related to the ways in which they react to its ending. Thus, age differences may exist in reference to defining and practicing friendship, but not in reference to termination, simply because each is a distinct process.

Sex differences in reaction to termination were inconsistent across questions. Girls in this sample were more reluctant than boys to initiate breakups. This may be because girls have a smaller network of friends than boys and they also tend to make friends more slowly than boys. A girl without a best friend may have no one to play with, but a boy in the same situation

could turn to other boys in his friendship network. Indeed, few boys in this sample said they looked for a new partner immediately after a breakup. Presumably, these boys' companionship needs could be met by other pre-existing friendships. Girls, in general, also appear to be somewhat less casual than boys about these breakups. Though they did not differ from boys in their affective reactions to the experience, they were more likely to discuss the event with others, and they were also more likely to tell their partner explicitly that they had decided to terminate the relationship. Because of their greater willingness to talk, this sample of girls demonstrated a greater degree of self-disclosure about their friendships. In this, they resemble adult women whose friendships are more strongly associated with intimacy (Caldwell & Peplaw, 1982; Hill & Stull, 1981). Men's friendship's are more likely to be associated with a pool of common interests (Bell, 1981).

The present study represents only an initial effort to assess children's perceptions of and reactions to friendship termination. The data seem sufficiently interesting to warrant further and more extensive study of this issue. Future work would benefit from focusing on direct observation and further interviewing of those children who have recently experienced termination. This would provide an opportunity to gather more precise details which may be lost in retrospective accounts.

APPENDIX A

Interview

Hi. My name is . I'm trying to learn about what happens when kids are friends with each other, and I'm especially interested in learning about what happens when, sometimes, kids stop being friends. So, I want to talk to you today for a little while about these things. Is this O.K.? Before we begin, I want you to remember one important thing, which is: there are no right or wrong answers. I only care about what you think, and only you and I will hear your answers. I won't tell anyone what we talk about in here -- not your teachers, not your parents, and not other children. I will tape record your answers so I won't forget them, because I talk to a lot of children. Is that O.K.? Is there anything you want to ask me before we begin?

Here is a picture of seven boxes that increase in size. You can see that number one is the smallest and number seven is the largest. Suppose I asked you how much you liked E.T., and I told you that pointing to box number one meant you liked him "hardly at all," pointing to box number seven meant you liked him "a whole lot," and pointing to box number four meant that you "neither liked him a whole lot nor disliked him." Which box would you point to? O.K. That means you like him . Now, point to the box that shows me how much you like to take awful tasting medicine. Remember that one means "hardly at all," seven means "a whole lot," and four means that you "neither like it a whole lot nor dislike it." O.K. That means you like it . Do you have any questions abuot these boxes? . . . O.K. Now I'd like to start talking with you about friendship.

A. Warm Up Questions

1. How do kids get to be best friends? Can you tell me two things that they do?

2. Name two things that you do special with a best friend that you don't do with other kids.

B. General Questions Regarding Termination

1. Sometimes, kids who were best friends just stop being friends at all. Why does this happen? Give me two reasons.

2. You said that kids would stop being best friends because (fill in with previous response given by child); tell me, how often would this have to happen before they stopped being best friends? (Use scale)

3. When a kid wants to stop being best friends with another kid, does he/she usually let that person know this in some way? (Yes or No)

4. If yes . . . in what way does he/she usually let that person know this?

5. If no . . . <u>why</u> doesn't he/she usually let the person know?

C. Hypothetical Story About Friendship Termination

Here are some pictures of two kids who are best friends. This is Anne/Bill and this is Sally/Dave. They spent a lot of time together, they did their homework together and they also went to "special" places together (like the movies or the beach). All this ended because Anne/Bill:

a. would not help Sally/Dave when she/he needed help, and Sally/Dave decided not to be friends with Anne/Bill anymore (for younger children).

b. wouldn't keep secrets about Sally/Dave that she/he promised never to tell, and Sally/Dave decided not to be friends with Anne/Bill anymore (for older children).

Do you have any questions about this story? (Pause)

I would like you to think about what happened between Anne/Bill and Sally/Dave, and I will ask you a few questions about this story. (Pause)

1. How do you think Anne/Bill felt when Sally/Dave decided to end the friendship? Remember Anne/Bill would not help Sally/Dave.

2. Did Anne/Bill feel this hardly at all or a lot? (Use scale)

3. How do you think Sally/Dave felt when she/he ended the friendship? (a) Remember Anne/Bill would not help Sally/Dave; or, (b) Remember Anne/Bill told secrets about Sally/Dave.

4. Did Sally/Dave feel this hardly at all or a lot? (Use scale)

5. You know Anne/Bill and Sally/Dave are in the same class at school. How do you suppose Anne/Bill felt when she/he saw Sally/Dave in school?

6. How do you suppose Sally/Dave felt when she/he saw Anne/Bill in school?

7. Suppose the teacher told them to work together on a special project, what do you think would happen?

D. Questions Regarding Personal Experience With Termination

1. Have you and another person who were best friends ever stopped being friends at all? (Yes or No)

2. How often has this sort of thing happened to you? (Use scale)

3. When was the last time this happend to you?

   Please think about this last time because I want to ask you a few questions about it. (Pause)

4. Why did this happen?

5. Who wanted to stop being friends first:

   a. you?
   b. the other person?
   c. both of you?

6. How did you feel when this happened?

7. Did you feel this a little or a lot? (Use scale)

8. What did you do right after this happened?

9. Anything else?

10. Did you talk to anyone about this? (Yes or No)

11. If yes . . . who?

12. Did you look for a new friend right away? (Yes or no)

End of Interview

Thank you for talking with me today. As I mentioned before, I won't tell anyone what we talked about in here -- not your teachers, not your parents, and not other children. In return, I would like you to do something for me. Please do not tell any of your classmates what we talked about today. I will be talking with some of them at some other time and it wouldn't be good if you talked to them first. O.K.? Do you have any other questions? Good-bye and thanks again.

APPENDIX B

Coding Guide

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Question	Codes	Category
B1a.	1	Fighting
	2	Not practicing the "rules" of friendship. (Examples: not sharing or helping; being "mean"; teasing or hurting; telling secrets; talking about the other behind his/her back; ignoring the other, etc.)
	3	Third party problems (Examples: finding a new friend; not liking someone one's friend likes; etc.)
	4	Realization of need for change (Examples: being bored or tired of the other; developing different interests or different personality traits.)
	7	Miscellaneous
	8	Don't know, can't remember
	9	Question not asked
B1b.	1	Fighting
	2	Not practicing the "rules" of friendship. (Examples: not sharing or helping; being "mean"; teasing or hurting; telling secrets; talking about the other behind his/her back; ignoring the other, etc.)
	3	Third party problems (Examples: finding a new friend; not liking someone one's friend likes; etc.)
	4	Realization of need for change (Examples: being bored or tired of the other; developing different interests or different personality traits.)
	7	Miscellaneous
	8	Don't know, can't remember
	9	Question not asked

B2	1-7	(scaled response)
	8	Don't know, can't remember
	9	Question not asked
B3	1	YES
	2	NO
	8	Don't know, can't remember
	9	Question not asked
B4	1	Explicit message Telling the other directly in a face to face confrontation
	2	Implicit message Letting the other know indirectly (Examples: ignoring the other; not playing; calling or talking to the other.)
	7	Miscellaneous
	8	Don't know, can't remember
	9	Question not asked
B5	1	To avoid hurting the other's feelings
	3	To avoid interaction with other because of respondent's feelings (anger, embarrassment, etc.)
	7	Miscellaneous
	8	Don't know, can't remember
	9	Question not asked
C1	1	Sad
	2	Glad
	3	Mad/upset
	4	Regret
	5	Conflict (two or more conflicting emotions

		are expressed by the child; e.g., sad, but also glad)
	7	Miscellaneous
	8	Don't know, can't remember
	9	Question not asked
C2	1-7	(scaled data)
	8	Don't know, can't remember
	9	Question not asked
C3	1	Sad
	2	Glad/good
	3	Mad/upset
	4	Regret
	5	Conflict (two or more conflicting emotions are expressed by the child)
	7	Miscellaneous
	8	Don't know, can't remember
	9	Question not asked
C4	1-7	(scaled data)
	8	Don't know, can't remember
	9	Question not asked
C5	1	Sad
	2	Mad/upset
	3	Ignored other
	4	Ashamed/embarrassed/left out/lonely
	5	Wants reconciliation
	6	Two or more categories expressed
	7	Miscellaneous

	8	Don't know, can't remember
	9	Question not asked
C6	1	Sad
	2	Mad/upset
	3	Ignored other
	4	Ashamed/embarrassed/left out/lonely
	5	Wants reconciliation
	6	Two or more categories expressed
	7	Miscellaneous
	8	Don't know, can't remember
	9	Question not asked
C7	1	Will fight
	2	Will reconcile
	3	Will ignore each other
	4	Will refuse to work together
	5	Two or more of the above possibilities expressed
	7	Miscellaneous
	8	Don't know, can't remember
	9	Question not asked
D1	1	YES
	2	NO
	8	Don't know, can't remember
	9	Question not asked
D2	1-7	(scaled data)

	8	Don't know, can't remember
	9	Question not asked
D3	1	One week or less
	2	Eight days to one month
	3	More than one month to one year
	4	More than one year
	8	Don't know, can't remember
	9	Question not asked
D4	1	Fighting
	2	Not practicing the "rules" of friendship. (Examples: not sharing or helping; being "mean"; teasing or hurting; telling secrets; talking about the other behind his/her back; ignoring the other, etc.)
	3	Third party problems (Examples: finding a new friend; not liking someone one's friend likes; etc.)
	4	Realization of need for change (Examples: being bored or tired of the other; developing different interests or different personality traits.)
	7	Miscellaneous
	8	Don't know, can't remember
	9	Question not asked
D5	1	You
	2	Other person
	3	Both
	8	Don't know, can't remember
	9	Question not asked
D6	1	Sad

	2	Glad
	3	Mad/upset
	4	Regret
	5	Conflict (two or more conflicting emotions are expressed by the child)
	7	Miscellaneous
	8	Don't know, can't remember
	9	Question not asked
D7	1-7	(scaled data)
	8	Don't know, can't remember
	9	Question not asked
D8	1	Physical separation (Examples: went home; went away; changed seat)
	2	Looked for/found another friend to play with
	3	Ignored other/forgot other/did nothing
	4	Sought/achieved reconciliation
	7	Miscellaneous
	8	Don't know, can't remember
	9	Question not asked
D9	uncoded	no response from most
D10	1	YES
	2	NO
	8	Don't know, can't remember
	9	Question not asked
D11	1	Peer
	2	Parent

	3	Sibling
	4	Teacher
	7	Miscellaneous
	8	Don't know, can't remember
	9	Question not asked
D12	1	YES
	2	NO
	8	Don't know, can't remember
	9	Question not asked